

Battle Casualty

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This story draws on the authentic life story and Civil War memoirs of my great-grandfather, John H. Leonard. However, I have changed the names because the first part of the story is fiction. I never had the conversation with my paternal grandmother because she was gone before I was two years old. The photograph mentioned, however, exists.

Some kids are lucky. They get to have grandparents—both grandmas and grandpas. And some even get to know a great-grandparent or two.

All I ever knew were my two grandmothers. Mostly I remember my mom's mother, Grandma Chandler, because she lived the longest. I was in high school when she died. I remember sitting on her lap when I was little and thinking how fat she was. In fact my brother and I had a saying about heavyset people, "A little bit fat, but not as fat as Grandma." She was sort of crabby, too.

So I wish I had known my other Grandma better, Grandma Whitcomb, my dad's mother. I only saw her a few times, because she lived in Vermont and we lived in the Midwest. The last time was when I was ten, but I remember it well. We were staying at her house while on a trip, and my parents had to go somewhere so she was trying to "entertain" me while my brother was taking a nap.

I don't know why she thought I would be interested in them, but she brought out a box of old photographs. The ones I liked best were pictures of trains my grandfather had taken, because he worked for a railroad. But there was one more that made me curious. It was a picture of my dad and my uncle sitting on the steps of the old Whitcomb place with Grandma. She was a lot younger, then, but it was easy to tell that it was she in the photo. My grandpa wasn't in the picture, because I guess he took it.

But there was another lady in the picture, an older one.

"Who's that other lady?" I asked Grandma.

"That's your great-grandmother Whitcomb, your dad's grandma. She lived with us while your dad was growing up."

I got the feeling that Grandma hadn't been too happy about that. I asked another question.

"Why did she have to live with you? Was Great-Grandpa Whitcomb dead?"

Grandma paused and looked out the window, then turned to me. "No, Larry. He wasn't dead. He just didn't live with your great-grandma."

I couldn't understand that, so I blundered ahead. "Why not? Didn't he like her?"

I thought for a minute that Grandma wasn't going to answer me, but finally she did.

"I don't think he disliked her. But he went off and left her alone with your grandpa and his brother, your dad's uncle Will. And he never came back to her."

"Why not?" At age ten a boy doesn't know that some questions can have embarrassing answers.

"Larry, let's just say he wanted to live somewhere else but your great-grandma didn't want to go there."

I persisted. "Where did he want to go?"

"He wanted to go to Oklahoma. It used to be Indian Territory but they were opening it up to settlers from the East."

"Why did he want to go there?"

"I guess he was just tired of milking cows in Vermont. He thought he could get rich if he went someplace else. So he went by himself, because your great-grandma wouldn't go with him. He left her all alone with her two boys and never even sent her any money."

"That wasn't nice."

"No, Larry, it wasn't very nice. I'm afraid Great-Grandpa Whitcomb wasn't a very nice man. So that's why your dad's grandma had to live with us."

I studied the photograph again. "Didn't he ever come back to her? What happened to him?"

Grandma sighed. "No, he didn't come back to Vermont till after Great-Grandma has passed away. When he was an old man he came back and lived in the old soldiers' home in Bennington."

"Was Great-Grandpa a soldier?"

"He was in the Civil War, with the Fourteenth Vermont Regiment."

“Did my dad ever see him?”

“He saw him once. He was in Bennington with his cousin who knew him. They saw him sitting in a rocking chair on the porch at the soldiers’ home. But they didn’t cross the street to talk to him.”

“What was his name?”

Grandma closed her eyes, as though she didn’t want to say it. “His name was . . . John L. Whitcomb. But look, Larry, your parents are back. Please don’t say anything to your dad about what I’ve told you about his grandfather.”

That was my last talk with Grandma Whitcomb, because she died soon afterward. Later on I did ask my dad about his grandfather. He wasn’t upset, but he didn’t have much to add to what I had learned from Grandma.

Time passes quickly, doesn’t it? All too quickly. Before I knew, it seems, I was married with children of my own and my parents were grandparents. Then my father died, and eventually my wife and I had to move my mother out of her house into a retirement home.

That’s when I found the box.

It was a box of old letters my dad had saved, letters between his grandparents—my Grandma Whitcomb’s parents, not my grandpa’s. They were interesting, and that’s a story in itself. But there was another document that caught my eye. It was written in fading ink with crude spellings and missing punctuation. At the top was written “The Battle of Gettysburg, by John L. Whitcomb.” It wasn’t a letter. It was more like a talk my great-grandfather had given to some fellow veterans of the Civil War, and it bore no date. It began like this:

On or about the 25th or 26th of June 1863 the 2nd Vt Brigade were encamped in the vicinity of Occoquam River in Virginia.

Great-Grandfather went on to tell how his brigade had to march toward Gettysburg to meet the Confederate army. He told of an incident along the way. As they marched along his company heard cheering from the ranks ahead of them.

And soon our Co came up of course the mystery was explained. It was this. In the door of a small Cotage house stood a young Girl. She had on an apron. Now comrades you must think that a young lady with an apron on was small cause for so much Cheering. From the waist to the bottom of the dress skirt stripes of red and white alternate. From the waist up to the throat and joints of the sholder something in the shape of a triangle was blue and over this were spread the Stars. The Stars and Strips, Emblem of Liberty. Could any one help but Cheer. No. And up went three cheers from Co G and a rousing Tiger, and so on until all had passed by.

Fascinated, I read on through the account of the march, which included mention of the capture, trial and execution of a “Rebel Spy.” Finally the brigade reached the scene of the battle about to unfold.

Soon now we began to hear musketry mingled with the louder and heavier reports of Cannon, and the wounded were coming back. I never shall forget the first one of them. His face was all covered with blood, he was wounded about the head, his cap in his hand, and as we passed him he swung his Cap and shouted, Boys, we have had a hard one to-day, but now we’ll lick them. A little ways further and we are on the battle field of Gettysburgh. Night is near at hand. The fighting soon stops and all is quiet but an occasional gun from some picket post.

But the day had been a fearfull one for the First and Eleventh Corps. Gen Reynolds of the 1st Corps was killed, shot through the neck. He was at the time riding forward with a few members of his Staff to inspect the field, with view of bringing the rest of his troops into favorable position, when the enemy opened a full volley of musketry, a ball striking him in the neck. Feeling wounded he turned to his soldiers and shouted, Forward men: for Gods sake forward, and fell dying into the arms of one of his companions. Hundreds from the ranks of

the 1st corps lay beyond the village stretched in death. Of those who went into the fight in the morning but one half remained.

John went on to relate the awful drama of the battlefield.

Just at day light the next morning, July 3rd, the enemy opened with a few Guns on our position. The second shot that came over went into the Cassion of Gun which close to my Company, blue the whole thing to pieces killing two horses and wounding several of the men and some of my Company did not escape unhurt. In the smoke and confusion we charged right down to the front about 30 or 40 rods and lay down.

For two hours this storm of shot & shell raged in all its fury. We were the first line of battle, and during these few hours there was 125 cannon concentrated on this point, the left centre. At length came the expected Charge of Infantry. Longstreets Corps, massed with Pickets division in front, came down on us with a rush. Our men waited untill they got most to us, and jumped up and began firing, which brought them to a stand still, the ground strewed with their dead and dying. Again with the fierceness of desperation they rushed forward and again were met with the same deadly reception. At about this time they undertook a flank movement. Col Rose of the 14th with part of the Reg^t head them off, and at the same time, the 16th Reg^t Col Veasey mad a charge and broke them all up, Hundreds of them throwing down their arms and coming into our lines as prisoners. The tide of the Battle lulled for a time, And again the Artillery did its work alone, untill about 4 oclock when the last desperate Charge was made, the Grand effort which was to sweep the Union lines, or result in the total defeat of the rebel army.

I continued reading through Great-Grandfather's account of "Pickett's Charge."

Nearly the whole of Pickets division, finding itself unable to retreat, was captured, and the remaining divisions reeled back in confusion leaving the ground literally covered with dead. This decided the fate of the Battle. The enemy had staked all upon this last desperate Charge and had been hurled back in confusion and enormous losses.

At dark our Brigade was relieved and sent to the rear for rest and to support a Battery. The roll was called in Company G and of the 36 or 8 that went in, in the morning, only about 14 answered to their names, some killed, some wounded and some missing. The 14th Reg^t suffered the most of any of the Brigade beaing in the most Exposed position. Myself and a Comrade were detailed to pick up the dead. That I must say, Comrades, was the hardest duty I had to perform while in the service.

I laid the yellowed pages down, not trying to stifle the tears that ought not to well up in the eyes of a grown man.

War, wherever it breaks out, is a scourge upon the human race. The Civil War tore the fabric of our nation and scarred the lives of those who were exposed to its horrors, whether of South or North. The dead and maimed paid their awful price, and those who survived the battlefield paid a price of their own in memories that beset them the rest of their lives.

Did the trauma of Gettysburg have something to do with why John L. Whitcomb later deserted his young Vermont family and struck out upon a new venture in a then-remote part of our country? I will never know the answer. And I do not excuse what my great-grandfather did to his loved ones.

But I will never be ashamed of him.